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Title: A Biography of Edmund Spenser

Author: John W. Hales

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A BIOGRAPHY OF EDMUND SPENSER, BY JOHN W. HALES
Revised 1896

From the Macmillan Globe edition of
THE WORKS OF EDMUND SPENSER

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EDMUND SPENSER.

Ille velut fidis arcana sodalibus olim
Credebat libris; neque, si male cesserat, unquam
Decurrens alio, neque si bene; quo fit ut omnis
Votiva pateat veluti descripta tabella
Vita senis.

Hither, as to their fountain, other stars
Repairing in their urns draw golden light.

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The life of Spenser is wrapt in a similar obscurity to that which hides from us his great predecessor Chaucer, and his still greater contemporary Shakspeare. As in the case of Chaucer, our principal external authorities are a few meagre entries in certain official documents, and such facts as may be gathered from his works. The birth-year of each poet is determined by inference. The circumstances in which each died are a matter of controversy. What sure information we have of the

intervening events of the life of each one is scanty and interrupted. So far as our knowledge goes, it shows some slight positive resemblance between their lives. They were both connected with the highest society of their times; both enjoyed court favour, and enjoyed it in the substantial shape of pensions. They were both men of remarkable learning. They were both natives of London. They both died in the close vicinity of Westminster Abbey, and lie buried near each other in that splendid cemetery. Their geniuses were eminently different: that of Chaucer was the active type, Spenser's of the contemplative; Chaucer was dramatic, Spenser philosophical; Chaucer objective, Spenser subjective; but in the external circumstances, so far as we know them, amidst which these great poets moved, and in the mist which for the most part enfolds those circumstances, there is considerable likeness. Spenser is frequently alluded to by his contemporaries; they most ardently recognised in him, as we shall see, a great poet, and one that might justly be associated with the one supreme poet whom this country had then produced—with Chaucer, and they paid him constant tributes of respect and admiration; but these mentions of him do not generally supply any biographical details. The earliest notice of him that may in any sense be termed biographical occurs in a sort of handbook to the monuments of Westminster Abbey, published by Camden in 1606. Amongst the 'Reges, Regin{ae}, Nobiles, et alij in Ecclesia Collegiata B. Petri Westmonasterii sepulti usque ad annum 1606' is enrolled the name of Spenser, with the following brief obituary: 'Edmundus Spenser Londinensis, Anglicorum Poetarum nostri seculi facile princeps, quod ejus poemata faventibus Musis et victuro genio conscripta comprobant. Obijt immatura morte anno salutis 1598, et prope Galfredum Chaucerum conditur qui felicissime po{e}sin Anglicis literis primus illustravit. In quem h{ae}c scripta sunt epitaphia:—

Hic prope Chaucerum situs est Spenserius, illi
Proximus ingenio proximus ut tumulo.

Hic prope Chaucerum, Spensere poeta, poetam
Conderis, et versu quam tumulo propior.
Anglica, te vivo, vixit plausitque po{e}sis;
Nunc moritura timet, te moriente, mori.'

'Edmund Spenser of London, far the first of the English Poets of our age, as his poems prove, written under the smile of the Muses, and with a genius destined to live. He died prematurely in the year of salvation 1598, and is buried near Geoffrey Chaucer, who was the first most happily to set forth poetry in English writing: and on him were written these epitaphs:—

Here nigh to Chaucer Spenser lies; to whom
In genius next he was, as now in tomb.

Here nigh to Chaucer, Spenser, stands thy
hearse,{1}
Still nearer standst thou to him in thy verse.
Whilst thou didst live, lived English poetry;
Now thou art dead, it fears that it shall die.'

The next notice is found in Drummond's account of Ben Jonson's conversations with him in the year 1618: 'Spenser's stanzas pleased him not, nor his matter. The meaning of the allegory of his Fairy Queen he had delivered in writing to Sir Walter Rawleigh, which was, "that by the Bleating Beast he understood the Puritans, and by the false Duesse the Queen of Scots." He told, that Spenser's goods were robbed by the Irish, and his house and a little child burnt, he and his wife escaped, and after died for want of bread in King Street; he refused 20 pieces sent to him by my lord Essex, and said he was sure he had no time to spend them.'{2} The third record occurs in Camden's *History of Queen Elizabeth (Annales rerum Anglicarum et Hibernicarum regnante Elizabetha)*, first published in a complete form in 1628. There the famous antiquary registering what demises marked the year 1598 (our March 25, 1598, to March 24, 1599), adds to his list Edmund Spenser, and thus writes of him: 'Ed. Spenserus, patria Londinensis, Cantabrigienis autem alumnus, Musis adeo aridentibus natus ut omnes Anglicos superioris {ae}vi Poetas, ne Chaucero quidem concive excepto, superaret. Sed peculiari Poetis fato semper cum paupertate conflictatus, etsi Greio Hiberni{ae} proregi fuerit ab epistolis. Vix enim ibi secessum et scribendi otium nactus, quam a rebellibus {e} laribus ejectus et bonis spoliatus, in Angliam inops reversus statim exspiravit, Westmonasterii prope Chaucerum impensis comitis Essexi{ae} inhumatus, Po{e}tis funus ducentibus flebilibusque carminibus et calamis in tumulum coniectis.'{3} This is to say: 'Edmund Spenser, a Londoner by birth, and a scholar also of the University of Cambridge, born under so favourable an aspect of the Muses that he surpassed all the English Poets of former times, not excepting Chaucer himself, his fellow-citizen. But by a fate which still follows Poets, he always wrestled with poverty, though he had been secretary to the Lord Grey, Lord Deputy of Ireland. For scarce had he there settled himself into a retired privacy and got leisure to write, when he was by the rebels thrown out of his dwelling, plundered of his goods, and returned to England a poor man, where he shortly after died and was interred at Westminster, near to Chaucer, at the charge of the Earl of Essex, his hearse being attended by poets, and mournful elegies and poems with the pens that wrote them thrown into his tomb.'{4} In 1633, Sir James Ware prefaced his edition of Spenser's prose work on the State of Ireland with these remarks:— 'How far these collections may conduce to the knowledge of the antiquities and state of this land, let the fit reader judge: yet something I may not passe by touching Mr. Edmund Spenser and the worke it selfe, lest I should seeme to offer injury to his worth, by others so much celebrated. Hee was borne in London of an ancient and noble family, and brought up in the Universitie of Cambridge, where (as the frutes of his after labours doe manifest) he mispent not his time. After this he became secretary to Arthur Lord Grey of Wilton, Lord Deputy of Ireland, a valiant and worthy governour, and shortly after, for his services to the Crowne, he had bestowed upon him by Queene Elizabeth, 3,000 acres of land in the countie of Corke. There

he finished the latter part of that excellent poem of his "Faery Queene," which was soone after unfortunately lost by the disorder and abuse of his servant, whom he had sent before him into England, being then a *rebellibus* (as Camden's words are) *{e} laribus ejectus et bonis spoliatus*. He deceased at Westminster in the year 1599 (others have it wrongly 1598), soon after his return into England, and was buried according to his own desire in the collegiat church there, neere unto Chaucer whom he worthily imitated (at the costes of Robert Earle of Essex), whereupon this epitaph was framed.' And then are quoted the epigrams already given from Camden. The next passage that can be called an account of Spenser is found in Fuller's *Worthies of England*, first published in 1662, and runs as follows:— 'Edmond Spenser, born in this city (London), was brought up in Pembroke-hall in Cambridge, where he became an excellent scholar; but especially most happy in English Poetry; as his works do declare, in which the many Chaucerisms used (for I will not say affected by him) are thought by the ignorant to be blemishes, known by the learned to be beauties, to his book; which notwithstanding had been more saleable, if more conformed to our modern language. 'There passeth a story commonly told and believed, that Spenser presenting his poems to queen Elizabeth, she, highly affected therewith, commanded the lord Cecil, her treasurer, to give him an hundred pound; and when the treasurer (a good steward of the queen's money) alledged that the sum was too much; "Then give him," quoth the queen, "What is reason;" to which the lord consented, but was so busied, belike, about matters of higher concernment, that Spenser received no reward, whereupon he presented this petition in a small piece of paper to the queen in her progress:

I was promis'd on a time,
To have reason for my rhyme;
From that time unto this season,
I receiv'd nor rhyme nor reason.